

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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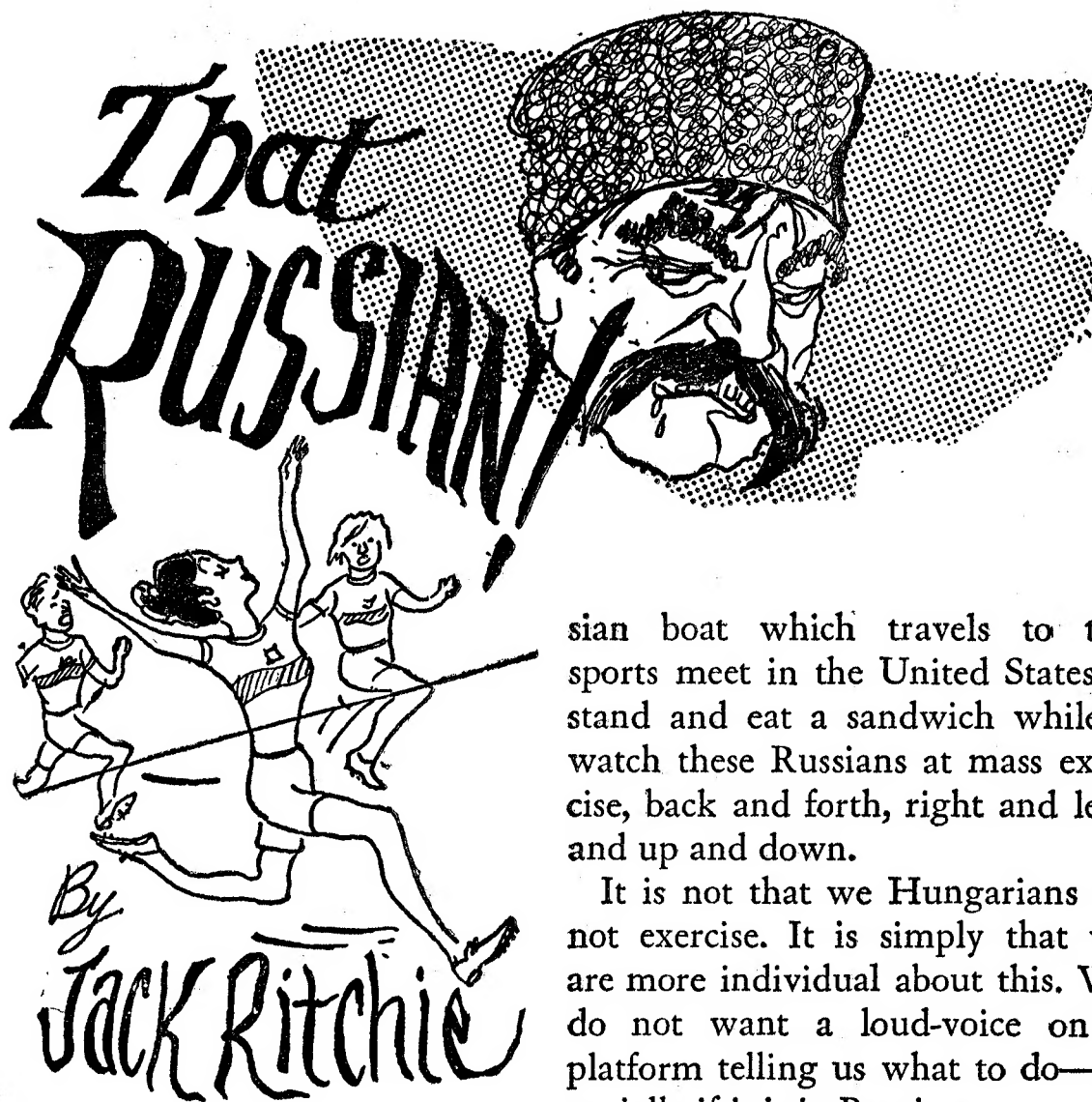
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The ship is always Redder on the other side of the sea.



AH, how Nadia could run—like a gazelle, like an antelope—for at least ten seconds; Mariska too.

For myself, I throw my weight around—which is the hammer.

On the upper deck of this Rus-

sian boat which travels to the sports meet in the United States, I stand and eat a sandwich while I watch these Russians at mass exercise, back and forth, right and left, and up and down.

It is not that we Hungarians do not exercise. It is simply that we are more individual about this. We do not want a loud-voice on a platform telling us what to do—especially if it is in Russian.

I observe the women's group down below and the overwhelming number of sturdy legs, but Nadia does not have sturdy legs. They are long and at a glance one sees that she can run and probably

THAT RUSSIAN!

must, for she has lustrous black hair and violet eyes and one thinks of the ballet rather than the cinder track.

Mariska appears at my side. "You are watching Nadia again?" she asks. "That *Russian*?"

Mariska is the fastest woman in all Hungary. This is true also for events in Poland and Italy. However, in Western Germany and France, she comes in second to Nadia in the 100 meter dash.

It is obvious that Mariska is very jealous of Nadia's running—fifty percent of the time, at least—and from the narrowness of her eyes, I have the feeling that in America they will settle this once and for all.

"We should have defected in Germany or France," Mariska says. "Or even Italy."

I shake my head. "No, Mariska. Since our ultimate goal is the freedom of America, does it not pay to remain with the team until it arrives there? In this manner we are assured free passage."

We become aware that Boris Volakov has moved beside us.

Boris is a most unpopular man. He is commissar for the Russian team, plus in overall charge of the voyage. It is a rumor that his unfavorable reports have caused the disappearance of one high-jumper, one long distance runner, and one hop, skip, and jump.

"You are attending the All-Nations Friendship Party on board tomorrow night?" he asks.

With the Russians, we speak English. It is a beautiful language and besides it irritates them.

"I am sorry," Mariska says, "but I am developing a cold."

"I have this trouble with my sinuses," I say. "This always requires forty-eight hours for the cure."

Boris smiles like a shark and is not disturbed. "I have talked to the leaders of all nationalities and they will see that medical problems of that nature are cleared up by the time of the party."

He looks Mariska up and down. "I have always admired the Hungarians. I have spent some time in Budapest."

"Oh?" Mariska says with great sweetness. "As a tourist?"

He clears his throat. "Not exactly."

Now, on the deck below, the exercises have come to a close and the group is dismissed.

Boris excuses himself and walks toward the iron stairs which lead to the lower decks.

Nadia looks up and sees that he is coming down. Very casually, but firmly, she begins to walk away.

It is interesting to watch—from my height—this pursuit and the evasion, this looking back over the

shoulder, this increasing of the pace, this series of sharp right and left turns around lifeboats and funnels.

I study the situation and see that eventually she is about to be trapped—for this Boris is tricky and foresighted.

"I think I will go downstairs," I say to Mariska.

She looks at me, but says nothing.

I go down the stairs and after five minutes, manage to intercept Nadia. "This way," I say, and take her arm.

"Oh," she says, "it is you again," for we have met and talked before whenever I was able to create the opportunity.

She comes where I take her, which is to crouch behind a winch, and we wait. Soon Boris passes by, the yellow gleam of pursuit still in his eyes.

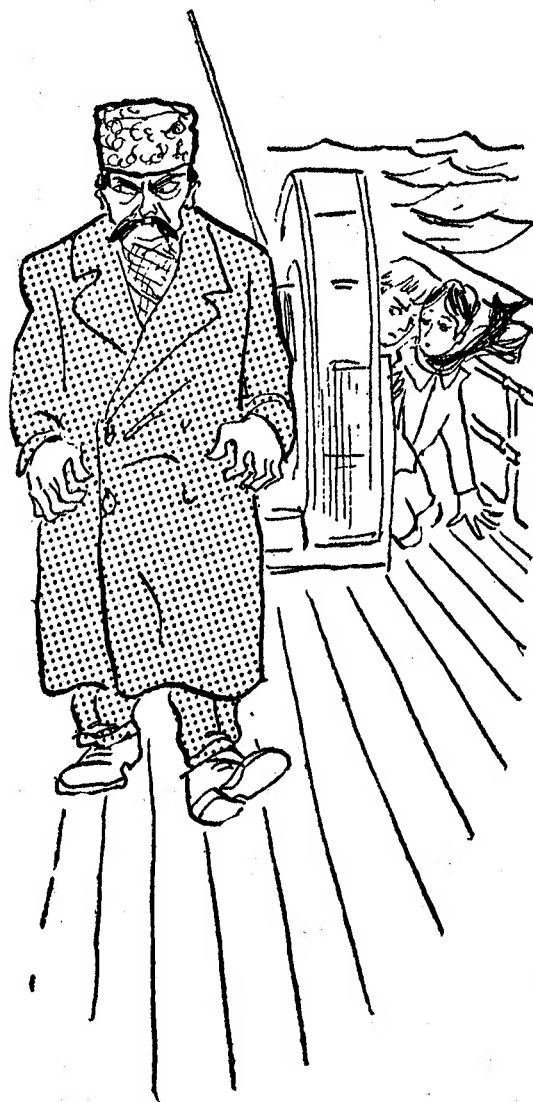
Nadia takes a deep breath. "So far I have been saved by one thing or another, but I am running out of miracles and excuses."

"Why are excuses even necessary?" I say. "Is not a simple 'no' in his face enough?"

She looks at me like I am a child. "Life is not always that simple. Boris is a man of much influence."

"Ah yes," I say wisely. "I understand that he has sent three men to Siberia."

THAT RUSSIAN!



She smiles, but tightly. "They were not men and they were not sent to Siberia. We are no longer that primitive in the treatment of our athletes. They were women who said 'no' and they were simply dismissed from the team. Today they are teaching calisthenics to pre-school children in Kandalaksha, which is just beyond the Arctic Circle, but still in Europe."

"Nadia," I say, "France is a nice

country and free—in a capitalistic way, of course—and this is true also of Western Germany and Italy. Why did you not seek asylum in one of these places? It is unlikely that Boris would have continued pursuit."

She shakes her head. "No. I could not do anything like that."

"You have relatives in Russia? They would be liquidated?"

"We no longer liquidate relatives," she says stiffly. "However, I do not wish to leave the team. It is a great honor to be a member and this I would not willingly give up."

I feel anger stirring. "So remaining on the team is of greater importance than your honor?"

She looks frosty. "I would prefer to have both."

She thinks more on the subject of Boris. "He is the commissar of the athletes," she says bitterly, "but in his life he has yet to run even the one hundred meter dash. He is greedy and opportunistic. He goes as the wind blows—wherever it is easiest, wherever he has the most to gain for himself. This is how he has come to his present position, after beginning as the custodian of the uniforms. Also, I think that in Russia he was a speculator in the black market, but has always been too clever to be caught."

I rub my jaw. To me has come the expression that if a mountain

does not come to the Mohammedans, then it is necessary for the Mohammedans to go to the mountain. "Do not despair," I say, "I will personally work on this problem."

That evening in the dining room, I sit at Boris' table—which is easy, for there is always room—and over tea I ask, "Have you ever been to New York?"

"No," Boris says. "I know nothing about America except that the poor are exploited by the rich."

"How true," I say, and then sigh. "It is unfortunate, but I will not be able to visit my cousin Stephen when we arrive there. He is one of these rich exploiters."

Boris is interested. "Rich? But why can you not go to see him?"

I smile sadly. "Because he is a defector and as a loyal member of the party, I certainly would not want to be seen in his presence. He fled from Hungary two years ago."

Boris' mind fastened on one point. "A *rich* defector? Before he defected, did he somehow manage to—ah—transfer money to some Swiss bank? Hm?"

"No," I say. "When Stephen arrived in America, he was penniless."

Boris thinks on this too. "He defected but two years ago, but *today* he is rich?"

I nod. "He has a large estate in

Hoboken, a swimming pool, two limousines, three mistresses, and eight horses."

Boris is impressed. "Three? But how did this all happen?"

"It is all the responsibility of his agent, who has the strange American name of John Smith. This John Smith has Stephen's experiences written into a book which has become a best seller. And also it will soon be made into a motion picture in which Stephen will hold a percentage."

Boris is puzzled. "But there are tens of thousands of defectors. Surely not every one of them could write a book and expect to make so much money?"

"Of course not," I say. "But Stephen was an important man behind the Iron . . ." I clear my throat, "... in our country. He was a *commissar* overseeing the Fejer Building Institute. Perhaps you have heard of his book? *I Was a Commissar for the F.B.I.*?"

Boris frowns. "It is somehow vaguely familiar."

"People are extremely interested in Stephen," I say. "There is a shortage of commissars in America, for not many of them defect. They know when they have it good."

Boris agrees. "Good, yes. But riches, no." He looks very casual. "This John Smith agent, where

does he live, this capitalist pig?"

"In Chicago at a place called State Street. Probably his name is in the telephone book."

When I rise to leave Boris is still thinking about my cousin Stephen, who does not exist.

The night of the Friendship Party there comes a thick fog upon the ocean and it is necessary for the ship to slow almost to a halt and blow its horns often. Even so, we almost run into other ships, for we are now near New York and the traffic lanes are heavy.

In the dining room, I find that Nadia, Mariska, and I have been assigned to Boris' table.

He talks hardly at all. Mostly he is preoccupied and he drinks a good deal.

It is a yawning evening until ten when there is trouble in the bar among the united Czechoslovakians. The Czechs and the Slovaks begin to fight and the Ruthenians watch and smile.

When order is restored, I notice that Boris has left his previous thoughts and is now looking at Nadia.

His voice is thick with the drink. "Nadia, let us, you and I, walk about the deck."

"No," Nadia says. "The fog is bad for my throat."

"You are not a singer," Boris snaps and then he glares at her.

"How would you like to teach calisthenics to pre-school children?"

The band strikes up with dance music and I immediately sweep Nadia upon the floor.

"Nadia," I say, "this is not the moment to spill the soup in the ointment. You must cooperate with Boris for the time being."

She is shocked. "You, of all people, to say *that*?"

I explain hastily. "I mean only for this walk on the foggy deck. You can come to no harm, for I think that he has drunk too much to be dangerous. I even wonder whether he can still walk at all."

She studies me. "Just what are you up to, Janos?"

I smile. "I have a clever plan and I will tell you when it works. I have the feeling that soon you will never see Boris again."

When we return from the dance, Nadia is more friendly and soon she and Boris rise and move toward the door. He walks much better than I anticipate and so I begin to worry.

Finally I too rise and walk out into the fog. I hesitate. Where have they gone? To the right or to the left? I listen, but I hear nothing.

I turn to the right and after a dozen steps I bump into two people who are much close together. I recognize the man as a Czech

high-jumper and the woman as a Rumanian gymnast, which is bad politics at the present time, but they do not seem to care.

"Pardon," I say. "Did anyone pass this way recently?"

The man peers into my face and is relieved that I am not a commissar. "No," he says. "Not that we notice."

I go in the opposite direction, bumping into objects occasionally and listening. All I hear is the groan of horns near and far, and when there is no horn noise, it appears that I am in a vacuum of silence. I think that I may have taken the wrong direction after all, but then I hear the commencing of a scream. It is muffled by the fog and yet I feel that it is near.

I press on immediately and after only twenty feet I come upon Boris and Nadia, and I see that he is considerably less drunk than I had thought. When I see what could be impending, fury springs into my blood and I forget all about Mohammedans and their mountains. I spring forward shouting a nationalist war cry.

Boris is considerably surprised by my entrance out of the fog, but he becomes even moreso when I immediately grasp him by one arm and one leg and swing him in a circle . . . once . . . twice . . . and then I let go.

It is a great fling, perhaps a world's record for this type of event. Boris and his scream fly through a thin patch in the fog and over the ship's rail.

Nadia joins me and we look into the swirling white gray which hides the water.

"Was this your clever plan?" she asks.

"No," I say sadly. "There is many a slip between the cup and the ship."

We are now silent and I try to think about this predicament.

"Nadia," I finally say, "I will surrender myself and confess. I will say that you were not even here. It was a personal quarrel."

"Nonsense," Nadia says. "Since no one has rushed here, evidently the fog muffled his scream and he was not heard. We will simply walk away. Boris just disappeared, and we know nothing about it at all."

"But you were seen leaving the ballroom with him," I say. "There will be questions asked. And there is no Supreme Court to throw out the confession that will inevitably follow."

Nadia offers another idea. "We will say it was an accident which we both witnessed. Boris slipped and fell overboard."

I shook my head. "I do not think we will be believed. It is generally

established that commissars do not meet death by accident."

We are silent again and then I sigh. "Nadia, I do not worry for myself. If no one heard the scream, I do not think that Boris will be missed before tomorrow and we will have arrived in New York by then. Freedom is but a leap or a dash beyond."

She is wide-eyed. "You are going to defect?"

"Yes," I say. "We have planned upon this for a long time."

The wide eyes become narrow eyes. "We? Who is we?"

"Mariska and I."

Her lips tighten. It is strange how these women athletes are so jealous of each other's ability to run. Among men, there is more sportsmanship.

"America is a big country," I say. "It is big enough for *two* runners of excellence."

"I doubt this," she says, but sighs. "However, I do not think I have much of a choice."

We arrive in clear weather at the Port of New York the next morning. Soon we descend the gangplank while the ship's loudspeaker calls out for Boris to report to his contingent.

There is a rumor—which Nadia and I have started—that Boris has drunk too much and fallen asleep in some corner of the ship.

We step without trouble onto American soil and are taken to the hotel.

I would have preferred to participate first in the sports meet before defecting—as would Nadia and Mariska—but to postpone our defecting could possibly be fatal. So at the first opportunity, the three of us join and find the nearest police station and declare ourselves to be political refugees.

It is something I have never regretted, and three months later—at my wedding—I see Bela, a pole vaulter on our team who also defected, but after the meet. Evidently he has heard that I was to marry and wished to attend the event.

We shake hands and he smiles. “So it was you who threw Boris overboard,” he says.

Perhaps I pale a bit, for if this is made public information, I am ruined. The Americans would not shield a murderer, even if the victim is a Russian. “Did you witness the event?” I ask quickly.

He shakes his head. “No. But I have just heard that Boris himself maintains that this happened.”

I blink. “Boris Volakov is alive?”

Bella smiles. “You tossed him overboard just as a small freighter glided past in the fog, and Boris landed unnoticed on the canvas top of a lifeboat. The length of the fall, however, rendered him unconscious for perhaps a half hour.”

I take a breath of relief.

Bela continues. “When Boris awoke and ascertained that he was alive and on another ship, he rushed immediately to the captain on the bridge and announced that he was declaring himself a political refugee who wished to remain in the west, and he also wanted to send swiftly a radiogram to a Mr. John Smith of State Street, Chicago.”

I sighed. “So Boris is now in America?”

Bela smiled again. “No. Unfortunately for Boris, the ship upon which you tossed him turned out to be a Russian freighter.”

It was a successful wedding. I was handsome and Nadia, my bride, looked beautiful.

The maid of honor, of course, was Mariska, my sister.

